



# Exploring population redistribution at sub-municipal levels – Microurbanisation and messy migration in Sweden's high North

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## ABSTRACT

To contribute to more balanced perspectives on sub-municipal population change in sparsely populated areas (SPAs), this paper closely examines a local pocket of growth in a shrinking Northern Swedish municipality. Integrating Swedish register data with in-depth qualitative insights, the geographic study examines patterns and processes of uneven local population dynamics linked to life course migration. This is done through a socio-spatial cluster analysis containing, first, 15 aggregate socioeconomic variables for sub-municipal areas, and then individual characteristics like birth countries, age groups, sex ratios, educational attainment, and employment status. A *Foresight* approach and interviews with locals, municipal officials, and incoming lifestyle migrants complement this. Studying these individuals' practical compromises regarding housing, income, and leisure at sub-municipal levels helps in overcoming fallacies in population change research at broader regional levels, and illustrates the limits of relying solely on quantitative demographic change indicators. The paper shows that urban traits in the municipal centre and rural natural amenities around a dogsledding trail combine to attract and retain different population groups. This adds to population change studies and shows that municipal administrative centres in SPAs are not necessarily growing while other villages are declining, and that population redistribution at the municipal level does not automatically imply the movement of people to municipal centres from a municipality's minor villages.

## 1. The changing speed and details of globalisation in the high North

The aim of this paper is to contribute to more balanced perspectives on sub-municipal population change in sparsely populated areas (SPAs) by closely examining a local growth pocket in Åsele municipality (Fig. 1). Peripheral areas are often viewed as distant and disconnected from general urban-rural and global core-periphery structures (Carson and Carson, 2014). As such, Sweden's high North is often described as consisting of 'declining villages' characterised by the loss of public and commercial services and businesses as well as shrinking populations; youth are leaving while remaining residents are aging, and deaths are outnumbering births (Jonsson and Syssner, 2018; Peters et al., 2018). Retrenching welfare state services are debated in the media (Kejerhag and Brännström, 2020) and academia (Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015; Enlund, 2020) in connection with threatened facilities like gas stations,

post offices, supermarkets, movie theatres, and hotels. However, it is not accurate to state that all Northern Swedish places are shrinking. Thus, we contest general myths that a universal decline in SPAs makes it nearly impossible to live more or less permanently in Northern rural communities (see also Carson and Argent, 2020) and that counterurban migration flows primarily go from urban to rural areas (see also Milbourne, 2007; Bell and Osti, 2010). We uncover characteristics of population growth and decline in the municipality of Åsele in Northern Sweden, linked to lifestyle migrants' motivations to move to the area around Gafsele village. This sub-municipal area is a growth outlier within the aggregated picture of population decline (Carson et al., 2016:397).

Drawing on sub-municipal statistics and qualitative data in Åsele municipality, we illustrate that relying solely on quantitative demographic change indicators overlooks subtle changes in population redistribution. Integrating external sub-municipal fine-grained

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quantitative data with internal in-depth qualitative insights, we address two research questions: 1) What population redistribution patterns arise in Åsele municipality, based on descriptive statistics and socio-spatial cluster analysis? and 2) What social constructs of daily practices in Åsele town and Gafsele village do the fieldwork participants report? The first question examines population redistribution and microubanisation through georeferenced socioeconomic variables in sub-municipal areas

and individual migrant characteristics regarding birth countries, age groups, sex ratios, educational attainment, and income sources. The term ‘social constructs’ in the second question refers to perceptions of living in Åsele based on practices, rhythms, and experiences in the villages regarding housing, income, and leisure (Thissen et al., 2021), through which we gained a deeper understanding of people’s location choice related to their daily local practices and preferences for rural and

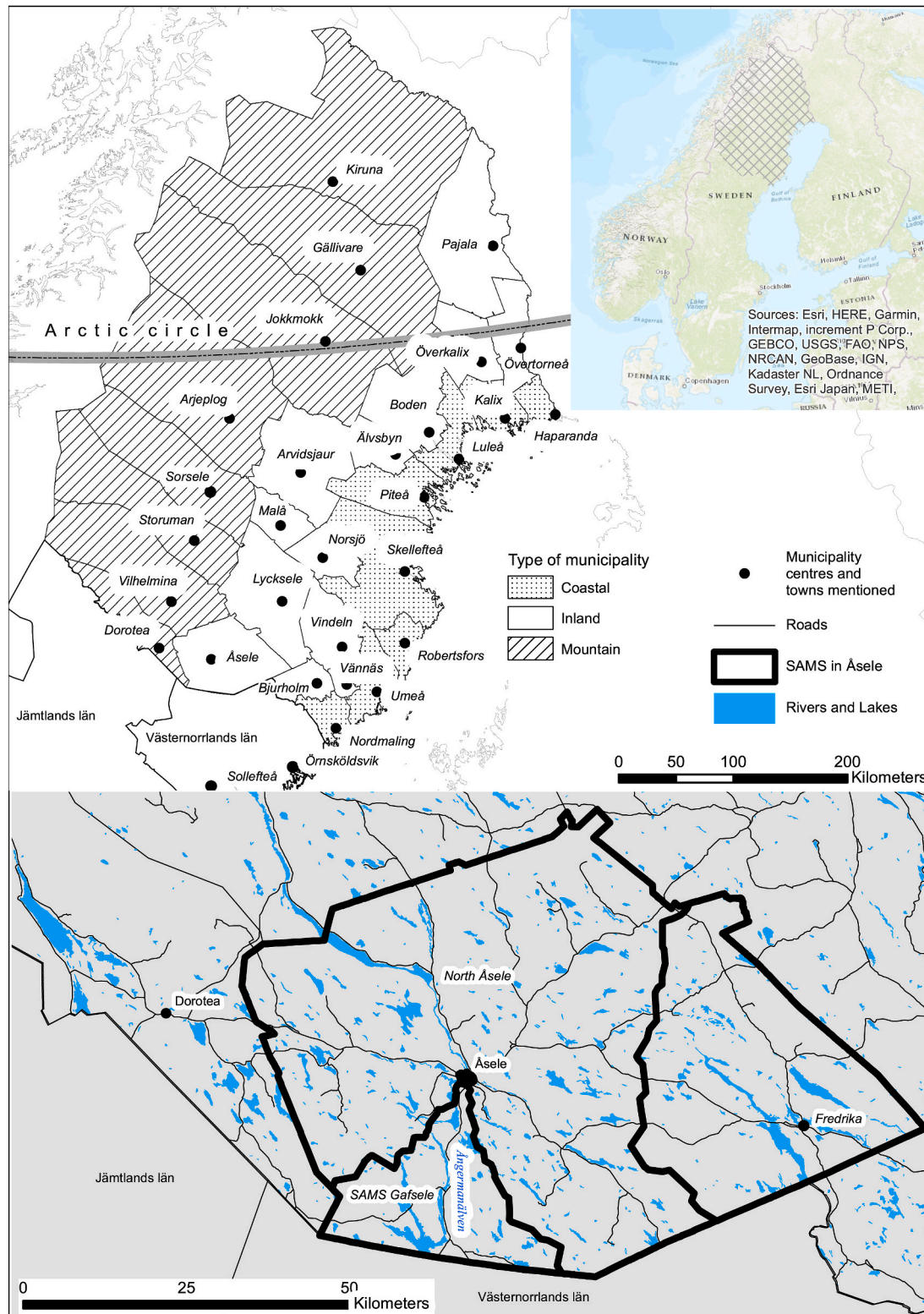


Fig. 1. Maps showing research areas. Figure created by Linda Lundmark.

microurban living. The combination of such methods adds to population change studies, showing that municipal administrative centres in SPAs are not necessarily growing while other villages are declining, and that population redistribution at the municipal level does not automatically imply the movement of people to municipal centres from a municipality's minor villages.

The next section presents population redistribution in terms of counterurbanisation, microurbanisation, and messy life course migration (Stockdale, 2016). Sweden's high North socioeconomic geography is described, after which the quantitative and qualitative approaches are explained. We present the results and then discuss them and draw conclusions, as well as suggest future research connecting microurbanisation with housing, work, and leisure.

## 2. Messy population redistribution

Although the literature is dominated by studies of migration up or down the urban hierarchy, migration patterns are often 'messy', with multiple upward, downward, and lateral (rural-to-rural) moves (Stockdale, 2016). As people migrate for various combined reasons (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016) and their motivations can change due to local contexts and over the life course (Stockdale and Catney, 2014), this section nuances Northern Swedish SPAs' problematic image of decline (Eriksson, 2008; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015). It connects migration with demography, employment, and other socioeconomic dimensions linking domestic, refugee, and lifestyle migration with potential socioeconomic changes at sub-municipal levels.

### 2.1. 'Counterurban' and 'microurban'

The unfolding human and economic geographies of different places and the evolving relations between perceived urban and rural settlements are historically contingent developments (Pred, 1984; Woods, 2007; Johansson, 2016). Although classifying places as either urban or rural risks overlooking differences between local social processes in various settlements (Hoggart, 1990; Barcus and Halfacree, 2018; Thisen et al., 2021), 'rural' and 'urban' are still often described as opposites. Urban areas are often described as entailing larger population sizes, higher population densities, closer proximity between built-up areas, larger proportions of the labour force engaged in non-agricultural work, more readily present 'urban' services and activities, and more political power (Champion and Hugo, 2004). Population redistribution, known as counterurbanisation, is experienced and analysed in various ways depending on the timing and magnitude of population change in origin and destination areas (Mitchell, 2004; Halfacree, 2008). Its basic elements are described as higher population growth rates at progressively lower levels of the settlement hierarchy, buoyant rates of population growth in peripheral rural areas, and populations shifting from urban-industrial areas to locations that are more favoured in environmental terms (Bowler, 2001:141).

Counterurbanisation in Sweden has been interpreted in various ways (Turner, 2013). Some studies argue that people in Sweden have considerably more space at their disposal and that city dwellers more often have direct links to rural areas through second homes compared to those in the UK (Amcoff and Stenbacka, 1998). Still, rural areas that are part of urban daily systems whose inhabitants are functionally more oriented towards nearby urban centres for employment and consumption are expected to encounter fewer difficulties in attracting new residents (ibid.; SKL, 2015; Lundmark et al., 2020; Syssner, 2020). As many parts of Northern Sweden are outside such urban daily systems, research has started to focus on adaptation to overall population shrinkage (Jonsson and Syssner, 2018; Syssner, 2020).

Within such shrinkage, this paper views microurban settlements in rural areas as having some form of physical and social cohesion, although they may differ greatly regarding size, composition, geographic location, functional urban-rural linkages, and urban or rural

amenities. As such, population size in Åsele municipality is much smaller than in 'micropolitan' settlements studied elsewhere (Bjarnason et al., 2021).

We study microurbanisation as a transition from a predominantly scattered rural population living in autonomous villages to population concentration in a small residential and administrative municipal centre in times of overall municipal population loss (based on Barcus and Halfacree, 2018:50; Carson et al., 2019; Thissen et al., 2021). This is often combined with changes from traditional rural to urban socioeconomic characteristics, for instance at the micro scale of commercial buildings when incoming entrepreneurs search for property for their businesses (Chai and Seto, 2019; Eriksson and Rataj, 2019). Such a transition can materialise on small plots of land, in patchy patterns, far from main urban areas, with limited geographic connection to existing urban areas and with low urban intensity (Chai and Seto, 2019). This offers a lens for studying SPAs' population dynamics in times of economic austerity and political debates about closing local libraries, day-care centres, primary schools, bus services, healthcare centres, and homes for disabled and older people in some villages while concentrating these facilities in 'central' places (Peters et al., 2018).

### 2.2. Messy life course migration

Youth leave rural Northern Sweden due to a lack of local education opportunities, long distances to higher education institutions, and weak local labour markets, and to establish new relationships (Amcoff and Westholm, 2007; Nedomysl and Amcoff, 2011; Hedlund and Lundholm, 2015). Simultaneously, youth return for short or long periods for reasons including family-building (Carson et al., 2020a) and escalator migration of young professionals, often working in the public sector. This involves people taking entry-level jobs in an urban context and working their way up to mid-level positions which can be traded in for higher-level positions in a rural context (Smith and Sage, 2014). Unlike elsewhere, many Northern Swedish small rural municipalities do offer academic high schools, local government jobs, other relatively diverse employment, and well equipped primary healthcare centres in central villages (Carson et al., 2020a). Also, industries like mining and forestry still provide employment opportunities for local and incoming youth.

Swedish university graduates are more prone than people with lower levels of education to move back to a rural region after graduation, for example when establishing a family (Bjerke and Mellander, 2017). Further, families with children whose highly educated adults work in the public sector also move from large cities like Stockholm to medium-sized or small towns in rural areas (Sandow and Lundholm, 2020). This can imply potential inflows of competence for municipal centres but less so for minor villages.

Return migration is important to small villages. In 2012, returnees made up 29% of Åsele municipality's population aged 15–29 and 14% of its total population (Carson et al., 2019). (Pre-)retirees have also been moving back to their municipality of birth in Swedish rural areas (Lundholm, 2012), but return locations have not been investigated through a sub-municipal lens. In pre-pandemic times, the cohort of people aged 55–70 was rather large and healthy, and this cohort's retirement plans had major impacts on the receiving rural villages as those born in rural areas were more likely than their urban-born equivalents to return in later life (ibid.). Thus, domestic migration implies both opportunities and challenges for municipal centres and surrounding villages in the North. Municipal centres may be in a relatively beneficial position due to the greater availability of public sector jobs and healthcare services there.

Two flows of international migration stand out for Northern Sweden: refugees from Africa and the Middle East, and lifestyle migrants from Western and Central Europe. In the mid-1980s, the new *Whole of Sweden Strategy* permitted Sweden's national government to place refugees with residence permits in all Swedish municipalities (Hudson and Sandberg, 2021). After some other changes the 'establishment reform' was



introduced in 2010, but municipalities kept their important role in the reception of newly arrived refugees regarding housing, schooling, and education (ibid.). The municipalities gained autonomy in deciding whether or not to receive refugees, and their decisions involved issues like solidarity, local labour market conditions, housing availability, and expected financial gain (Lidén and Nyhlén, 2015). One result was that refugees were often housed in municipal centres such as Åsele's municipal centre.

The numbers of resident permits granted to refugees in all of Sweden from 1985 to 2005 remained stable between 5000 and 9000 annually, before rising to record volumes of almost 72,000 in 2016 (Swedish Migration Agency, 2021). Countries of origin have shifted from Iran, Chile, Ethiopia, and Poland (1980s), via the former Yugoslavia (1990s) and Iraq and Somalia (early 21st century), to Syria in more recent years (ibid.). Following the record numbers, a new act concerning the reception of newly arrived immigrants, introduced in 2016, allowed refugees to move to other locations after receiving a residence permit. It is small inland municipalities' hope that refugees will become attached to their initial reception area while waiting for a residence permit (Hudson and Sandberg, 2021). Whether or not they can stay there depends on local employment and educational opportunities, but some refugees run restaurants or other small businesses in municipal centres, enabling them to stay and enjoy their natural surroundings (Eimermann and Karlsson, 2018).

Lifestyle migration has also played an important role. This is understood as 'the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009:2–3). This is hard to capture in statistics (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016), and those lifestyle migrants who run their own businesses are diverse in business aspirations and seasonal lifestyle-business balancing (Carson et al., 2018). Contrasting most domestic and refugee migrants, most lifestyle migrants prefer to settle in remote areas outside municipal centres to engage in nature-based practices (ibid.). Although many migrants contribute to local winter tourism development, their stays can be temporary or part of a strategy of multiple dwellings (McIntyre et al., 2006; Eimermann and Singleton, 2021). The transient and varied nature of their presence contributes to a patchwork of growing and declining areas (Carson et al., 2018).

Hence, the various central and surrounding villages' growth potential and possibly changing settlement characteristics from rural to more urban can reflect the particular incomer groups' growth potentials (Carson et al., 2019:29). These relocations are both messy for the people involved, who need to juggle networks, practices, and experiences constructed in different areas, and for villages whose residents arrive from different places and depart in different directions (Stockdale and Catney, 2014; Stockdale, 2016).

### 3. Setting the scene

In Northern Sweden (originally inhabited by the Indigenous Sámi people), Swedish colonial settlements' various contractions and expansions were related to rises, changes, and declines in farming, logging, and mining (Carson et al., 2020b). As such, small-scale agriculture's decreasing economic viability and increasing employee centralisation in dominant industries generally led to population loss for small villages and isolated farms, and population agglomeration in more urban centres, particularly from the 1970s onwards (Bylund, 1960; Enequist, 1960; Carson et al., 2019).

About 500,000, or one-twentieth of Sweden's population of 10.4 million, live in Norrbotten and Västerbotten counties ('län' in Swedish), which make up about one-third of Sweden's land area (Fig. 1). Population concentration in the coastal cities of Skellefteå (73,000), Luleå (78,500), and Umeå (130,000) has been rapidly increasing since the 1950s (Statistics Sweden, 2021). Umeå and Luleå are university cities and regional centres for government administration, public services, and

car, forest, and mining industries. The coastal area is expected to further benefit from a 'green industry' boom (battery factories, major railway projects, etc., Eriksson, 2021), while inland areas struggle with limited housing opportunities (Lundmark, 2020). Many inland house owners live far away, selling prices for homes are low, and it is difficult to get bank loans to construct new property because construction costs exceed the eventual house value (ibid.). However, houses that look abandoned can be both a sign of a decline in earlier ways of living and an opportunity for new ways of living (Peters et al., 2018:12).

Northern Sweden can be divided into an attractive western mountain range, an urbanised eastern coastal strip, and an amenity-poor inland 'in-between' (Koster and Carson, 2019). The mountain range offers amenities for tourism, but few places generate enough visitor nights, economic turnover, and employment to boost socioeconomic growth. Although almost all the villages in amenity-poor inland areas have been shrinking since the 1970s, population turnover in adjacent villages can differ substantially as they are experiencing uneven refugee and lifestyle immigration, and an outmigration of for instance young women, partly due to these places' different functional relationships with the rapidly urbanising regional cities (Johansson, 2016; Syssner, 2020).

Åsele municipality serves as a typical example of the opportunities and threats facing inland municipalities (Koster and Carson, 2019). About 1800 of its 2800 residents live in the municipal administrative centre of the same name, while the other 1000 live in 30 surrounding villages with population sizes between 30 and 300 (Statistics Sweden, 2021). The municipality's industrial profile is based on forestry and agriculture, while its tourism sector is less developed than in other parts of Sweden's North. Although resource extraction in forestry, mining, and energy sectors is still important, the public sector has recently gained importance for locally based employment in the central village (Carson et al., 2020b). Åsele has stronger historical links to surrounding settlements through forestry and agriculture than the purpose-built mining towns elsewhere do.

One surrounding settlement is Gafsele village, located 20 km from Åsele's municipal centre, which makes commuting from there easier than from places like Fredrika (at 70 km). Gafsele is located along the river Ångermanälven where it crosses the border between the counties of Västerbotten and Västernorrland, which is an important local geographic trait as traditional and current fields of exchange and influence are found along such river valleys. Gafsele has fewer than 50 permanent residents, and relatively many locals have moved south while keeping their houses there as second homes. Some from Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK have also found houses there to stay in seasonally or permanently, practising dogsledding as serious leisure (Stebbins 2009) or for dogsledding tourism (Carson et al., 2018), attracted by the Gafsele dogsledding trails' unique features (such as looping of roads, medium steepness, and intersections, Eimermann and Singleton, 2021). Some who arrived when the dogsledding World Cup was organised in Gafsele in 2007 have become established residents (Kemlén, 2013). These people have specific wishes regarding their living and working environments, but the lack of local housing and commercial buildings is a challenge. Hence, population developments in the Gafsele area serve as an example of local pockets of population growth in which the unplanned and unprecedented inflows of Western and Central European dogsledders and tourism entrepreneurs have surpassed local officials' expectations.

### 4. Methodology

The paper's socio-spatial cluster analysis provides descriptive statistics on the overall population redistribution of various population groups in four sub-municipal areas in Åsele municipality. Its qualitative analysis includes a *Foresight* approach (Karlsdottir et al., 2017) focusing on lifestyle migrants, native Swedes, and local officials regarding motivations and ponderings around living in the Gafsele area.

#### 4.1. Socio-spatial cluster analysis

This study draws on sub-municipal areas called SAMS (Small Areas for Market Statistics), created by Statistics Sweden in 1994 to study relatively homogenous residential areas (in terms of population composition). SAMS contain individuals' places of residence and employment at a 100 × 100 m resolution, providing accurate georeferenced opportunities to analyse register data. The SAMS subdivision has limitations, however, as the areas are seldom as homogenous as they were intended to be, and the divisions are different in different municipalities (Amcoff, 2012). This is mainly due to the various settlement morphologies and the origins of the SAMS divisions. Some areas were designed to include 1000 inhabitants, while others were based on different geographic divisions like electoral districts. Statistics Sweden replaced SAMS with DeSO in 2017–18, but we draw on the SAMS division of Åsele municipality into four areas, which can be understood from the local history, even though North Åsele in fact includes parts of southern Åsele (Fig. 1). DeSO identifies Åsele town and 'other Åsele' only, which is not suitable for this study.

We based our analysis on previously developed socio-spatial clusters drawing on georeferenced register data derived from Statistics Sweden's population registers for individuals aged 18+ living in Sweden (Adjei et al., 2021). The datasets contained demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and inter-municipal movement histories in Sweden. As direct international migration is difficult to monitor, we used movements of 'foreign-born' as a proxy. Hence, the scope of this method is domestic movement within Sweden, with a focus on migration to and not from the selected areas.

The clusters are socio-spatial because they group sub-municipal geographic areas into spatial clusters regarding their inhabitants' socioeconomic characteristics based on 15 macro- and micro-level variables (Fig. 2). This excluded variables with direct geographic connections in order to avoid biasing clusters on geographic relations (Hedlund, 2016). Instead, the six-cluster solution results from hierarchical analysis using Ward's linkage method measured using squared Euclidian distance (Romesburg, 2004), and a cluster stop command with distinct clustering characterised by high Calinski-Harabasz pseudo-F and Duda-Hart Je (2)/Je (1) values and small Duda-Hart pseudo-T-squared values (Duda et al., 2001). The solution includes uneven numbers of SAMS in each cluster, including some places with small populations that are hard to fit. North Åsele was designated Cluster 5 (resource manufacturing) due to its higher share of people employed in jobs that do not require vocational training, lower share of highly

educated population, and other characteristics, indicated in the Appendix. The other three areas were designated Cluster 1 (higher socioeconomic status A). Linked to employment characteristics in Section 2.1, we view Clusters 1, 2, and 6 as urban, Cluster 4 as rural, and Clusters 3 and 5 as neither specifically urban nor rural.

The analysis is based on three steps, studying georeferenced socioeconomic data on 408,477 people migrating between 1985 and 2015 to and/or within Norrbotten and Västerbotten. First, we identified areas of origin for movers from Norrbotten, Västerbotten, or elsewhere in Sweden to Åsele municipality. A caveat is that Västernorrland was labelled 'other Sweden', while fieldwork later showed that native Swedes in Gafsele maintain close cross-border connections with places in that county (Fig. 1). Second, we analysed flows from different clusters of origin to Åsele town (which in this study indicates the municipal administrative centre) and the Gafsele area compared with North Åsele and Fredrika to investigate emerging population redistribution patterns in Åsele municipality. Third, we linked clusters of origin with migrant characteristics regarding birth country, age group, sex, employment status, and educational attainment (where 'high' indicates three or more years of higher education). In employment status, our focus on micro entrepreneurs uncovered more subtle characteristics of growing and declining population groups in Åsele municipality (indicated by municipal officials in the qualitative study, and recognised in Carson et al., 2018 and Chai and Seto, 2019). These steps addressed research question 1.

#### 4.2. Qualitative analysis

More balanced perspectives on sub-municipal population change are also derived from qualitative fieldwork in Åsele (2016–19), providing a deeper understanding of people's location choice related to their social constructs of daily local practices and preferences for rural and micro-urban living (RQ2). We focused on the Gafsele area to uncover reasons for living there, drawing on three meetings with 16 municipal officials, five Foresight workshops with 16 participants, and eight interviews with international lifestyle migrants and others regarding local quality of life, business aspirations, and in- and outmigration (Table 1). In 2016, seven municipal officials provided information on the municipality's socioeconomic history and recent population trends. Pilot interviews with an Austrian, a Dutch, and a Swiss migrant indicated relevant research topics. The interviewees signalled special interests around dogs and dogsledding as reasons for their lifestyle migration to Åsele. To include social continuity and change over time, a second period of fieldwork was

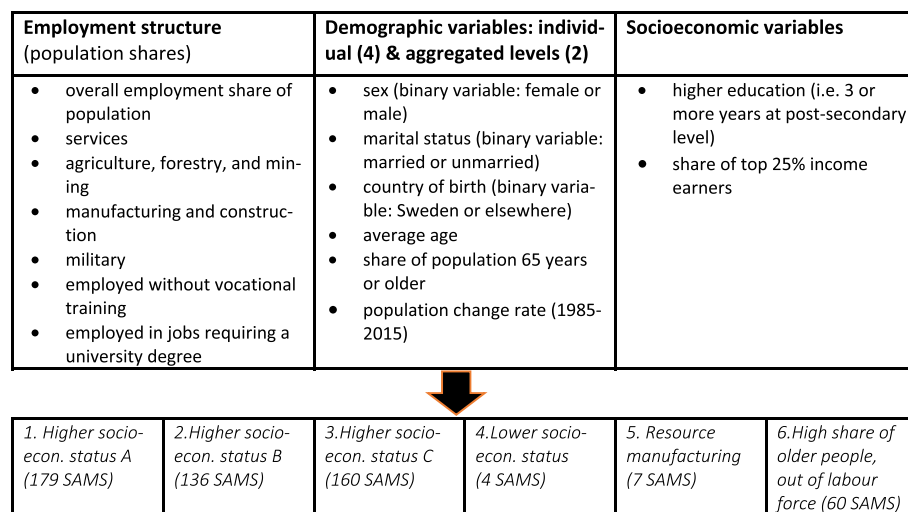


Fig. 2. Fifteen variables leading to six socio-spatial clusters.  
Source: Adjei et al., 2021.

**Table 1**Meetings, *Foresight* workshops, and interviews. Source: authors.

Method	Time (area)	Participants and birth years (pseudonyms)
Municipal Meeting 1	2016 (Åsele town)	7 Åsele municipal officials, e.g. the mayor, the business development officer, a teacher (Swedish for immigrants)
Pilot interviews	2016 (Åsele town)	3 lifestyle migrants: Marc, Miep, Paul
Municipal Meeting 2	2018 (Åsele town)	5 Åsele municipal officials, e.g. the mayor, the integration officer, the officer for growth
<i>Foresight</i> Worksh. 1	2018 (Åsele town)	2 native Swedes: Anton (1968), Oscar (1972)
<i>Foresight</i> Worksh. 2	2018 (Gafsele)	3 native Swedes: Anne (1951), Karl (1947), Per (1958)
<i>Foresight</i> Worksh. 3	2018 (North Åsele)	3 lifestyle migrants: Andy (1962), Kees (1961), Miep (1984)
<i>Foresight</i> Worksh. 4	2018 (Fredrika)	3 native Swedes: Carina (1979), Finn (1959), Stina (1957)
<i>Foresight</i> Worksh. 5	2019 (Gafsele)	2 native Swedes: Elsa (1983), Hans (1989)
Municipal Meeting 3	2019 (Åsele town)	1 lifestyle migrant: Angela (1985)
Follow-up interviews	Mar–Oct 2019	2 native Swedes: Philippina (1939), Johanna (1958)
		6 lifestyle migrants: Anders (1960), Andy (1962), Chris (1975), Ellen (1957), Mona (1993), Rick (1965)

conducted in 2018–19.

The second fieldwork period included a *Foresight* approach (Karlsdottir et al., 2017), which provided insights into respondents' social constructs of living in Åsele (Eimermann, 2021). This method facilitated studying intersections between community-level discussions on short- and long-term development perspectives and more top-down perspectives from relevant municipal officials. It revealed contrasts in political priority between the central village (Åsele town) and more peripheral practices in Gafsele.

We held the 2-h *Foresight* workshops at community centres, asking 1) What are the main challenges and opportunities in this village? 2) What would you like this village to be like in ten years? 3) What concerns do you have when it comes to quality of life, entrepreneurship, and migration? 4) Who could ensure that your wishes are met (individuals, the village, the municipality, the region, or national or other stakeholders)? and 5) What advice can you give the responsible parties so that your wishes can be fulfilled? and 6) Other relevant issues.

The final part of the fieldwork included interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of issues we identified during the *Foresight* workshops. A thematic analysis revealed that locals and incoming participants had varying preferences regarding housing and income sources as important factors for local living conditions and desired village futures (Karlsdottir et al., 2017).

## 5. Results: population redistribution in Åsele

### 5.1. Quantitative characteristics

Table 2 shows population developments for the years 1985–2015, during which Åsele municipality's population declined by 1415. As Åsele town experienced a smaller relative decline than Gafsele and the municipality in total, its population share increased from 51% to 57%. This implies increased population concentration in the central village while Gafsele SAMS shrunk more in relative terms, although its share in the municipal population remained stable around 9%. In contrast, Fredrika's share declined from 17% to 10%, partially due to a municipal merger with Åsele in the 1970s, after which Fredrika lost local public sector employment opportunities since it closed its town hall, post office, and theatre (also referred to during Workshop 4). This shifting population redistribution provides one main reason for studying this as a case of microurbanisation.

Table 3 shows domestic migration flows for migrants aged 18 or older. A total of 2271 people moved to Åsele municipality, 1210 (53%)

of them to Åsele town and 182 (8%) to Gafsele. Many more moved to the municipality from Västerbotten than from Norrbotten, which may indicate the links to proximate municipalities (Carson et al., 2020b). However, compared to its total share of 8%, relatively few people moved from Västerbotten to Gafsele (5%), and more moved from 'other Sweden' (10%). North Åsele and Fredrika show similar fluctuations, but people moved from 'other Sweden' to Gafsele to a greater extent (119/182) than to Fredrika (140/366). The next section explains that 'other Sweden' might mean 30 km away across the southern county border via fields of exchange and influences from neighbouring Västernorrland county. Hence, 'other Sweden' can indicate proximate migration as well.

Table 4 shows few incomers from Cluster 6 (compared to Clusters 4 and 5 with fewer SAMS, Appendix). A larger share from Cluster 4 moved to Cluster 1 SAMS Åsele town (127/1201) and Gafsele (28/182) than to North Åsele (36/513), while a relatively larger share moved from Cluster 5 to North Åsele (also Cluster 5). Such migration between SAMS in the same cluster makes messy migration more understandable, indicating that some people move to places with similar socioeconomic characteristics and not necessarily to proximate places. This also makes rural lateral migration more concrete, contesting the myth of unidirectional (urban-rural) counterurbanisation (Stockdale, 2016).

A different perspective (not in Table 4) shows that more people moved from Cluster 4 (with a large share of female population and a relatively high degree of employment in services) to Gafsele (15% of all incomers) and Åsele town (11%) compared to Fredrika (9%) and North Åsele (7%). These shares are the opposite for Cluster 5: 2% in Gafsele, 6% in Åsele town, 7% in North Åsele, and 10% in Fredrika. This suggests

**Table 2**

Population in Åsele and its SAMS, 1985–2015.

	Pop 1985 (%)	Pop 1995 (%)	Pop 2005 (%)	Pop 2015 (%)	Change '85- '15
Åsele	2146	2070	1787	1618	–528
town	(50.6%)	(51.6%)	(53.8%)	(57.2%)	(–24.6%)
Gafsele	377	381	299	245	–132
area	(8.9%)	(9.5%)	(9%)	(8.7%)	(–35%)
North	996	931	785	672	–324
Åsele	(23.5%)	(23.2%)	(23.6%)	(23.7%)	(–32.5%)
Fredrika	726	630	451	295	–431
	(17.1%)	(15.7%)	(13.6%)	(10.4%)	(–59.4%)
Total	4245	4012	3322	2830	–1415
Åsele	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(–33.3%)

Source: Adjei et al., 2021.

**Table 3**

Domestic migration to the SAMS in Åsele, 1985–2015.

	From Nb.	From Vb.	From other Sweden	Total
Åsele town	46 (54.1%)	557 (53.7%)	607 (52.9%)	1210 (53.3%)
Gafsele	9 (10.6%)	54 (5.2%)	119 (10.4%)	182 (8%)
North Åsele	14 (16.5%)	217 (20.9%)	282 (24.6%)	513 (22.6%)
Fredrika	16 (18.8%)	210 (20.2%)	140 (12.2%)	366 (16.1%)
Total Åsele	85 (100%)	1038 (100%)	1148 (100%)	2271 (100%)

Source: Adjei et al., 2021.

**Table 4**

Socio-spatial clusters of origin, 1985–2015.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Åsele town	328 (53.3%)	269 (51%)	413 (54.7%)	127 (57.2%)	70 (47.6%)	3 (60%)	1210 (53.3%)
Gafsele	43 (7%)	51 (9.7%)	54 (7.2%)	28 (12.6%)	4 (2.7%)	2 (40%)	182 (8%)
North Åsele	140 (22.8%)	117 (22.2%)	185 (24.6%)	36 (16.2%)	35 (23.8%)	0	513 (22.6%)
Fredrika	104 (16.9%)	90 (17.1%)	103 (13.6%)	31 (14%)	38 (25.9%)	0	366 (16.1%)
Total Åsele	615 (100%)	527 (100%)	755 (100%)	222 (100%)	147 (100%)	5 (100%)	2271 (100%)

Source: Adjei et al., 2021.

stronger socioeconomic similarities (in terms of employment sectors) between Gafsele and Åsele town than between Gafsele and the other SAMS.

## 5.2. Individual migrant-level statistics

Tables 5a and 5b present five characteristics for incomers to Åsele town and Gafsele, respectively. The tables specify total numbers and the clusters from which the migrants moved (latest change of address). A total of 1079 of 1210 incomers (89%) in Åsele town were native Swedes. Seventeen migrants in Åsele town were born in other Nordic countries, nine in Western or Central Europe, and 70 in the Middle East or Africa. In Gafsele, 159 of 182 incomers (87%) were born in Sweden. More

people moving to Gafsele were born in a Western or Central European country (11) than in a Nordic country (10) or the Middle East or Africa (1). This confirms previous findings that European lifestyle migrants moved to Gafsele to practise dogsledding as serious leisure (Eimermann and Singleton, 2021).

A total of 616 of 1210 incomers to Åsele town (51%) were aged 18–30 years, a larger share than to Gafsele (68 of 182, 37%). That relatively few people in their forties moved to Åsele town (124 of 1,210, 10%) and Gafsele (31 of 182, 17%) is in line with generally low levels of migration at this age (Stockdale and Catney, 2014), but Gafsele shows a higher proportion and relatively more people from (urban) Clusters 1 and 2 than from Cluster 3. More females (643) than males (567) moved to Åsele town, which can be related to public service concentration. This

**Table 5a**

Individual characteristics of incomers to Åsele town 1985–2015.

Characteristics	Cluster	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Birth country	Sweden	299	246	364	111	56	3	1079
	Nordic countries	5	1	7	1	3	0	17
	Western & Central Europe	0	3	5	1	0	0	9
	Eastern Europe & Baltics	5	0	5	1	0	0	11
	Middle East & Africa	15	14	19	12	10	0	70
	Other	4	5	13	1	1	0	24
	Total	328	269	413	127	70	3	1210
Age group	18–30	165	139	216	71	25	0	616
	31–40	60	47	79	18	16	0	220
	41–50	27	28	38	17	13	1	124
	51–65	49	40	45	13	12	0	159
	66–80	20	14	29	7	2	2	74
	80+	7	1	6	1	2	0	17
	Total (18+)	328	269	413	127	70	3	1210
Sex ratio	Female	177	144	222	61	38	1	643
	Male	151	125	191	66	32	2	567
	Total	328	269	413	127	70	3	1210
Education	Higher education	35	33	42	13	4	0	127
	Lower education	293	236	371	114	66	3	1083
	Total	328	269	413	127	70	3	1210
Employment status	Employee	195	176	247	63	38	2	721
	Micro business owner	6	5	10	4	1	1	27
	Farmer, sailor, unknown	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Data missing	124	88	156	60	31	0	459
	Total	328	269	413	127	70	3	1210

Source: Adjei et al., 2021.

**Table 5b**

Individual characteristics of incomers to Gafsele SAMS 1985–2015.

Characteristics	Cluster	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Birth country	Sweden	37	46	47	23	4	2	159
	Nordic countries	4	0	2	4	0	0	10
	Western & Central Europe	2	3	5	1	0	0	11
	Eastern Europe & Baltics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Middle East & Africa	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Other	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Total	43	51	54	28	4	2	182
Age group	18–30	10	22	26	8	1	1	68
	31–40	9	7	10	7	0	0	33
	41–50	12	10	7	1	0	1	31
	51–65	7	9	7	9	3	0	35
	66–80	5	3	4	3	0	0	15
	80+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total (18+)	43	51	54	28	4	2	182
Sex ratio	Female	17	24	30	10	2	2	85
	Male	26	27	24	18	2	0	97
	Total	43	51	54	28	4	2	182
Education	Higher education	4	2	9	0	0	0	15
	Lower education	39	49	45	28	4	2	167
	Total	43	51	54	28	4	2	182
Employment status	Employee	22	29	34	11	3	1	100
	Micro business owner	4	1	1	0	0	0	6
	Farmer, sailor, unknown	2	1	0	0	0	0	3
	Data missing	15	20	19	17	1	1	73
	Total	43	51	54	28	4	2	182

Source: Adjei et al., 2021.

implies more availability of employment in the service sector, healthcare, and schools (with a traditional overrepresentation of females). In contrast, more males (97) than females (85) moved to Gafsele.

Slightly fewer people opting for Gafsele had attained higher education (8%), compared to North Åsele (10%), Åsele town (10%), and Fredrika (11%). Most highly educated people moved to Gafsele and Åsele town from Cluster 3, indicating differences between cluster characteristics (few jobs requiring higher education) and these highly educated migrants. A lower proportion of highly educated individuals moved to Gafsele (2/15) than to Åsele (33/127) from Cluster 2 (with more urban traits, like a high share of female population and a higher share of employment in manufacturing). Although both are in the same cluster, this difference may be linked to more jobs in the service sector in Åsele town than in Gafsele (with agriculture and forestry as important sectors). This means both that migrants from a certain cluster do not necessarily possess the same characteristics as the cluster description indicates, and that Åsele town and Gafsele receive different proportions of migrants although they are both designated as Cluster 1.

Finally, regarding employment status, we focus on micro business owners, which the local municipal officials saw as an asset for local economics. With data missing for 73 individuals, only six (3%) incomers to Gafsele were registered as micro business owners; yet this share is larger than in Åsele town (27 of 1,210, 2%). However, the statistics do not show where these firms are located, and perhaps entrepreneurs attracted to Gafsele locate their firms in Åsele town because business property is more readily available there.

### 5.3. Housing and income strategies combined with serious leisure

Fieldwork participants indicated housing and income strategies combined with serious leisure (Stebbins, 2009) as major themes in their social constructs of living in Åsele. Results show similarities and differences between participants' opinions (Eimermann and Singleton, 2021). These evolved around three sets of overarching factors: micro-urbanisation, generational change, and different social networks.

One set of factors corresponds with micro-urbanisation. Åsele officials praised the compact municipal centre: 'Workplaces, schools, daycare centres, gyms, and nature are all within walking distance'. This, combined with lower house prices and better possibilities for remote

education and local public sector employment in Åsele town, attracted returnees in family-building or midlife stages. Oscar, a returnee's partner with no local roots, said 'our house, the gym, parking lots, etc. are much cheaper here and the atmosphere is more relaxed than in the city I come from'. This was also important to other migrants, as apartments in Åsele town were available for unaccompanied minors fleeing conflict in Syria and Afghanistan. Knowing from experience that young refugees usually leave Åsele after receiving a residence permit, the municipal integration officer organised social activities for them to increase their familiarity with the place and their likelihood of returning as they would view Åsele town's size and compactness as an advantage over both larger and smaller places. This specifies how officials described the concentrated housing and public and commercial services in Åsele town as being the right settlement size for various population groups (Jonsson and Syssner, 2018; Lundmark, 2020; Hudson and Sandberg, 2021).

Local and incoming participants added links to other villages to this focus on Åsele town. A young Dutch couple, Mona and Max, were attracted by Gafsele's trail and dogsledding community, but lived in Åsele town as they valued proximity to the grocery store and the pizzeria (absent in Gafsele). Mona worked part-time at the Åsele-based fire brigade, and ran a dog trimming service and wanted to start a dogsledding tourism business, which would be better located in Åsele town, she said: '... and our garden here is big enough for the dogs'. Other Dutch incomers (like Anders and Ellen) living in various villages also gathered regularly in Åsele town, at a pizzeria run by a former refugee. Such meeting places indicate interrelations between micro-urbanisation and different types of migration (Eimermann and Karlsson, 2018).

Another Dutch youngster, Miep, lived in a village 10 km south of Åsele town. She loved walking and hiking with her dogs, but saw no need to develop the area to attract more residents. She liked living in simplicity with less than 60 villagers, and working part-time as a truck driver or in healthcare in Åsele town. Johanna, a local living in the same place, also found the distance to Åsele town convenient for combining her work as a primary school teacher there with working at the village garden centre she owned with her partner. This adds qualitative insights to population redistribution studies, such as the reasons Mona and her partner preferred living in the municipal centre while Miep and Johanna would rather live in a minor village nearby.

Another set of factors is related to generational change. The local



wood-built community centre was built by Philippina and Johanna with their neighbours some decades ago. Johanna had decorated the walls and written plays that were staged there by locals, ‘but there are few villagers in the next generation who continue organising activities here’. Simultaneously, they realised that lifestyle migrants had moved into the area and that more people were looking for housing. Many houses were only inhabited a few weeks per year during the summer, winter, or hunting season. The participants indicated that the owners lived far away, that house prices were low, and that it was difficult to get bank loans for building new property since construction costs exceeded the eventual house value (affirming Lundmark, 2020). Participants said it is not easy to rent out local houses as they still needed to be maintained and prepared for renters, but as a permanent resident, Johanna saw possibilities as she was renovating a small house on their plot to rent out. This confirms and nuances findings that houses that look abandoned can be both a sign of a decline in earlier ways of living as well as an opportunity for new ways of living (Peters et al., 2018:12).

Older local native Swedes Anne and Karl ran the community centre in Gafsele village. Anne was engaged in the local branch of the Swedish outdoor association (an NGO promoting outdoor lifestyles), and helped the local dogsledding club with their annual races and events. The Gafsele workshop participants described local generational change: ‘Native Swedes with young children moved away to larger towns while childless lifestyle migrants in their thirties and forties are the right generation to engage in local activities’. For instance, Anne and Karl’s daughter had been chairing the dogsledding club board, but had moved to Örnsköldsvik (Fig. 1) and could not combine this position with taking care of her young children and working there. A few months after the workshop, Anne’s deteriorating health forced her to leave Gafsele for a care home in Åsele town. She appreciated the possibility to receive care in the municipal centre, but had become less mobile and her engagement with Gafsele had diminished. At the same time, lifestyle migrants like Chris, who had lived in the Gafsele area since the 2007 World Cup, had become more active in the local dogsledding club.

Third, different social networks were crucial. Chris had moved from Switzerland to a village in the Gafsele area. He spent a great deal of time training the dogs and maintaining the trail, and had become the dogsledding club’s new Chair. Testing new tools, he worked closely with an Italian man who ran a dogsledding equipment firm that sponsored some of the local races. This man (born in 1973) lived in Åsele town, close to his office, shop, and showroom. He sponsored races in Southern Sweden and maintained close links to equipment producers and innovators in Italy, which illustrates international networks and a more commercial way of dealing with dogsledding. Chris housed a German ‘handler’, whom he also knew through his international networks, to take care of the dogs. He worked in a minor local forestry business, which he had acquired when its local Swedish owner retired. This was a good way for Chris to earn enough money to cover the high expenses for the dogs and their food and equipment. Moreover, owning the forestry business gave him the freedom to combine work with frequent and long dog training.

There is a risk that these networks could lead to tensions in the future. For instance, Mats, a native Swede who lived not in Gafsele but in Sollefteå (Fig. 1), was a press agent during one of the major races in 2019. He said an Achilles heel of the races was that they were organised on a volunteer basis and that it was hard to find engaged people. The Gafsele dogsledding club collaborated with the Sollefteå dogsledding club, and Mats had started organising races on bare ground in Resele, anticipating milder winters with snow deficits. This illustrates how traditional fields of exchange and influence along the Ångermanälven river valley are still visible in functional links between Gafsele, Sollefteå, and Resele today. In contrast, Anders and Ellen had moved from the Netherlands to a village in neighbouring Vilhelmina (also along the Ångermanälven river). They were members of the Gafsele dogsledding club and in the same international dogsledding community as Mona. Anders was an experienced dogsledding referee but, to his dismay, was not invited to volunteer during races. Thus, cross-border linkages played

different roles for different people, but were still important for Mats and others (Eimermann and Singleton, 2021).

Another tension may arise from contrasting social constructs of dogsledding and land use. Andy and his family alternated periods of living in Germany with living in Gafsele. Their tourism business offered walking with dogs during the summer and dogsledding during the winter in Gafsele. Yet although they wanted to use the main Gafsele trail, ‘serious’ dogsledders did not appreciate their being ‘in the way’ when they were training (as Chris said), and preferred that they use other trails. So, although Anne and Karl highly appreciated Andy’s efforts and commitment to local development, the above example indicates land-use tensions between dogsledding as serious leisure and dogsledding as tourism. This may lead to intensified competition not only for land use, but also for available business spaces, commercial buildings, and housing.

## 6. Microurbanisation: practical compromises

This paper highlights that the population concentration in Åsele town did not occur in isolation, but rather in its immediate context. Native Swedes’ and incoming (lifestyle) migrants’ various regional and international fields of exchange contributed to developments in the sub-municipal population composition. Some were attracted by the serious leisure opportunities and natural environments in Gafsele, but had difficulty finding housing due to a local shortage of buildings, housing, and public and commercial services. This is important in many Northern villages’ socioeconomic developments (Carson et al., 2019).

The analysis provided more balanced perspectives on sub-municipal population change in SPAs, examining a local growth pocket in order to provide insights into why and how sub-municipal areas change. We relate figures of counter-urban and lateral rural migration flows in Section 5.2 to their local contexts (Stockdale and Catney, 2014). They indicate patterns of different population groups living in specific areas: relatively more people in their thirties and forties and Western and Central Europeans in the Gafsele area, and more older people and migrants from the Middle East and Africa in Åsele town. Although more detailed statistics at the village or hamlet level would provide more fine-grained data, any subdivision has both advantages and disadvantages when one is trying to capture villages’, industries’, and migrants’ socioeconomic characteristics. Also, the cluster analysis studied the latest change of address, while a sequence of the three latest changes would provide more longitudinal insights into migration trajectories and lengths of stay in different places. This would add more profound statistics to the qualitative data (here provided by the fieldwork participants’ stories stretching over many years).

Methodologic challenges include discrepancies between the cluster analysis, individual-level statistics, and qualitative fieldwork. Partially contradicting the cluster analysis results, the in-depth fieldwork showed that individuals did not always fit the cluster descriptions, for instance when they were young but coming from a cluster characterised by a relatively high number of older people. This raises questions regarding the extent to which cluster analysis provides accurate individual-level information. The qualitative fieldwork showed not only that Gafsele is a growth outlier but also that people moving there are different regarding their life course stage and strategies for combining income sources, housing, and leisure. This integration of external quantitative and internal qualitative methods nuances the results (Peters et al., 2018) and contests the myth that it is almost impossible to live more or less permanently in minor Northern rural communities (Carson and Argent, 2020). This is relevant in light of the planned green industry boom and its uneven effects on population concentration and dispersion in places like Northern Sweden (Eriksson, 2021).

Addressing the research questions, we found that although Åsele’s overall population has been shrinking, both the existing population and newcomers from different socioeconomic clusters have concentrated in Åsele town. We relate this to the concentration of housing, jobs, and

services there (RQ1). Qualitative insights linked the social constructs of microubanisation, generational change, and social networks to local social synergies and tensions (RQ2). Åsele town is seen as sufficiently compact and urban (Hudson and Sandberg, 2021), providing basic services complemented with amenities in the Gafsele area. This indicates people's practical compromises in order to combine the available housing and public and commercial services in the municipal centre with the advantages of active outdoor village life in surrounding areas.

Studying such compromises offers help in overcoming fallacies in population change research at broader regional levels, and illustrates the limits of relying solely on quantitative demographic change indicators. It is relevant for civic engagement studies when incoming lifestyle migrants engage in associations in more commercial ways (Eimermann and Singleton, 2021; Thissen et al., 2021), and for villages receiving older returnees when people need to leave again for residential health services concentrated in the municipal centre (Lundholm, 2012). This strengthens calls for attention to rural lateral migration at different life course stages (Stockdale and Catney, 2014; Stockdale, 2016), which concurs with previous research contesting the notion that counter-urbanisation consists mainly of unidirectional urban-rural flows (Milbourne, 2007; Bell and Osti, 2010).

In conclusion, this study found pluriform migration patterns and processes of uneven local population dynamics linked to life course migration. This should be studied through suitable methods paying attention to the combined roles of housing, income, and leisure as decisive for local quality of life and population redistribution in SPAs (Peters et al., 2018; Sandow and Lundholm, 2020). Results show that microuban daily activity systems, functional urban-rural linkages, and complementing urban and rural amenities differently affect gender issues and work-life balances (Massey, 1994, 2005). For instance, more males than females moved to Gafsele, and females worked in the public sector in Åsele town more often than males did. However, qualitative fieldwork revealed that both males and females were happy working part-time or irregular hours and spending more time on their serious leisure. They related their migration to ideas of simplicity in daily life, partly facilitated by low living costs and relatively short distances between villages. Future research can investigate how variegated population redistribution in sparsely populated municipalities relates to changing meanings of work and gender in serious leisure lifestyles linked to downshifting and voluntary simplicity when working and consuming less to regain the essence of leisure (Juniu, 2000).

Exemplifying uneven power relations between settlements, communities, and individuals (Massey, 1994, 2005), subtle tensions may be related to migration motivations, social networks, and a central village's more urban traits versus a peripheral village's perceived rural characteristics. Gathering detailed knowledge on inhabitants' different social constructs, wishes, and needs regarding land use is valuable for policy prescriptions in microubanising rural municipalities. This can help policymakers and planners determine whether and how to maintain physical infrastructure and fixed assets to sustain living in the sparsely populated North (Jonsson and Syssner, 2018). This is valuable for coping with the Swedish welfare state's continuing retrenchment (Enlund, 2020) and shrinking tax bases while facing unexpectedly long periods of overall population decline combined with unforeseen inflows of refugees and European lifestyle migrants, which is becoming more common in SPAs.

## Author contributions

**Marco Eimermann:** Conceptualization, Data curation (qualitative data), Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation & Methodology (qualitative data), Validation, Writing – original draft. **Evans Korang Adjei:** Data curation (cluster analysis), Investigation & Methodology (cluster analysis). **Thoroddur Bjarnason:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Linda Lundmark:** Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Software, Visualization.

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## Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.01.010>.

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